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War's Sad Toll: The Divided Houses of Nicaragua

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua — On warm summer weekends 25 years ago, Arturo José Cruz would pack up his young nieces and nephews and take them for overnight outings to the family ranch in the rural province of Carazo.

"Naturally, I remember those trips very pleasantly," said one of the nephews, Luis Carrión Cruz, one of the nine "comandantes" of the ruling Sandinista front. "But I don't consider Arturo a relative any more. What he is doing is bringing war, death and destruction to this country."

Arturo José Cruz is now a leader of the rebel coalition that seeks to depose the Sandinista Government. And this uncle who once doted on his nephew now returns the coldness in similar terms.

"Luis is brilliant and very sincere, but because of his attitude toward me, saying I am an imperialist agent or a C.I.A. mercenary, I don't consider him a relative," Mr. Cruz said in a telephone interview from Costa Rica. "He may be my sister's son, but he is not a relative to me."

Families Are Divided

Such conflicts have divided an untold number of Nicaraguan families. Two brothers edit newspapers in Managua that are ideologically at war. The chief spokesman for the Nicaraguan Army is the sister of the chief spokesman in Miami to the rebel Nicaraguan Democratic Force.

For Mr. Carrión Cruz's wealthy parents in the early 1960's, there was every reason to expect that their son would fulfill their aspirations and enter Nicaragua's ruling elite. When he was not spending weekends at the ranch with his uncle Arturo, the young Luis Carrión Cruz was compiling an outstanding academic record.

He was named the outstanding sixth-grade student in the country in 1964, and later he compiled the best record in his class at the rigorous Roman Catholic high school he attended in Managua.

He spent a year at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire preparing for college, making the honor roll each term, and then enrolled at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y.

Drops Out of School

But although Mr. Carrión Cruz eventually became one of Nicaragua's most important leaders, he did not reach power the way his parents had expected.

He did not earn a college degree, open a business and rise through the political ranks. Instead, he dropped out of school, returned to Nicaragua against his parents' will, and joined a radical Catholic group in a Managua slum.

Later, he stole his father's hunting rifles and fled to the hills to become a revolutionary guerrilla.

"He left me a note reminding me that I had always told him to be the best at whatever he did," said his father, Luis Carrión Montoya, who was then one of the country's most prominent financiers. "He said he was going to try to be the best at making revolution."

Mr. Carrión Cruz is among more than a dozen senior Sandinista leaders who came to the movement through their exposure to radical Catholicism. Like many of them, he lost much of his youthful religious faith as his commitment to Marxism grew. The Sandinista Minister of Education, the Rev. Fernando Cardenal, is a Jesuit priest who was among those who encouraged Catholic radicals like Mr. Carrión Cruz to grow into political revolutionaries.

'Profound Values' Noted

"From motivations rooted in true Christian faith, we made the youngsters step forward to a commitment to work for justice and the people," said Father Cardenal in a published interview. "This led to a second stage, where they ended up committing themselves to the Sandinista front. In this second stage many of them abandoned the Christian faith, but not the profound values that motivated them."

More than once, President Anastasio Somoza Debayle singled out Mr. Carrión Cruz and his brother Carlos, also a Sandinista activist, as examples of young people led astray by leftist clerics.

"Young men like the Carrión Cruz boys," he wrote in his memoirs, "became avowed Communists, and they had received their training from Jesuit priests."

Mr. Carrión Cruz rose to top leadership in the Sandinista underground more quickly than anyone had before him. Today, he is First Deputy Minister of the Interior, with principal responsibility for counterintelligence.

Youngest of 'Comandantes'

At 33 years of age, he is the youngest of the nine men who have held ultimate power in Nicaragua since the 1979 revolution. Some diplomats and others who have watched the Sandinistas believe he may be the smartest of the nine.

At one point, after Mr. Carrión Cruz had announced his intention to leave school, his father threatened never to speak to him again.

"Once, when my father first realized that I was secretly involved with the Sandinistas, he told me that if a war came, he would be with one side and I would be with the other," he said. "Fortunately, it never came to that."

Mr. Carrión Montoya did not carry

out his threat to cut himself off from his son. He said the years when his son was underground were "a very difficult time for me and for my wife, since we never knew when Luis might be captured or killed." But today he is generally sympathetic toward the Sandinistas.

"You can't escape being influenced by those you love," said Mr. Carrión Montoya, whose banking conglomerate was confiscated by the Sandinista Government. His business holdings have been reduced to a filling station franchise and part ownership of a Managua restaurant.

How They View the U.S.

Mr. Carrión Cruz and his uncle, Arturo José Cruz, absorbed very different views of the United States while they lived there. Mr. Carrión Cruz took part in college protests against the Vietnam War and recalls seeing "many strong

episodes of racism."

"When I lived in the United States, I saw the great contradictions of life there," Mr. Carrión Cruz said. "I saw that the relative luxury of a few countries had its necessary counterpoint in the misery and suffering of countries like Nicaragua. Individualism was taken to the extreme of people trying to climb over each other to get ahead."

"Capitalism failed in Nicaragua," he said. "It was obvious to me that something else was needed."

Mr. Carrión Cruz's uncle Arturo has lived in the United States during more tranquil periods, beginning in the 1950's. "I concluded that despite its negative features and all its imperialism, the United States has much good to offer the world," the uncle said. "It is over differences of opinions on questions like that one that so many Nicaraguan families have split apart."